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ABSTRACT

This project surveyed special education teachers who were employed in the Gadsden Independent School District, Anthony, New Mexico, during the 1992-93 academic year to identify attitudinal differences between special education teachers (N=8) who departed the district the following year and those (N=32) who remained in the district. A survey instrument was developed for the study. Teachers who departed tended to express more favorable opinions of principal support, school environment, student preparation, and student behavior. Teachers who departed tended to be first and second year teachers, and some were employed on special education provisional licenses. Teachers who remained in the district provided more favorable responses related to student contact, the ability of students to speak English, student cooperativeness, and student attendance. Overall, departure of special education teachers tended to be related to several factors: (1) the desire to relocate; (2) less than 5 years of teaching experience in the position being vacated; and (3) teaching under waivers in the position being vacated. The researcher's personal reactions to the research process are also provided as are reactions of administrators to survey results. (Author/DB)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION IN A NEW MEXICO PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

A REPORT TO THE SUPERINTENDENT

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Special Education Teacher Attrition

In a New Mexico Public School District

A REPORT TO THE SUPERINTENDENT

Maria Fuentes, M.A.

ABSTRACT

This project surveyed special education teaches who were employed in the Gadsden Independent School District, Anthony, New Mexico during the 1992-93 academic year to determine whether there were differences between the survey responses of the special education teachers who departed the district the following year and the special education teachers who remained in the district the following year. Thirty-two teachers who remained in the district responded to the survey as well as eight teachers who left after the 1992-93 academic year. Although there were several exceptions, the results of the survey were generally consistent with the literature . Special education teachers who departed following the 1992-93 year tended to express more favorable opinions of principal support, school environment, student preparation, and student behavior. The teachers who departed the district tended to be first and second year teachers and some were employed on special education provisional licenses. Teachers who remained in the district provided more favorable responses related to student contact, the ability of students to speak English, student cooperativeness and student attendance.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Billingsley, Bodkins, and Hendrick (1993) state that only a limited number of studies have been conducted addressing the question of why teachers leave or stay in special education. As a result, practitioners have difficulty drawing conclusions about attrition and retention of special education teachers. These authors further state that the question of why special education teachers leave teaching has received little attention by policymakers, administrators, and researchers. The authors further suggest that the shortage of special education teachers may reach a crisis in many districts. This writer believes that this crisis is already occurring in some areas and in specific school districts. The Gadsden Independent School District, for example, has had vacancies unfilled in special education since the beginning of the current school year.

The literature indicates that a higher number of younger teachers in special education may be more likely to leave the profession than older teachers (Billingsley and Cross, 1991). Although a major attraction for many new teachers to the special education field was the desire to help special education students, prior experience in working with disabled individuals and availability of jobs were important factors (Billingsley, Bodkins, and Hendrick, 1993).

On the other hand, special education teachers tend to leave teaching jobs for reasons such as unsatisfactory work

environment, personal issues, and other job opportunities outside the teaching field (Billingsley, Bodkins, and Hendrick, 1993). For example, McKnob (1993) as cited by Billingsley and Cross, reports "that relocation, maternity and marriage were the most frequently cited reasons for teachers leaving special education positions." A different author states that "teachers with less than five years' experience are more likely to leave teaching" (Bogenschild et al., 1988).

Billingsley (1993) notes that shortage of teachers often results in unwanted consequences. A primary concern is the number of unqualified teachers often required to fill vacant positions." According to Bogenschild, Lauritzen,& Metzke (1988), provisional license may be the solution in the short term; however, this practice does not solve the long term problem of teacher shortage in special education.

Kueker and Haensly (1991) suggest that mentor induction programs for first year teachers be explored. These authors note that other professions such as law, medicine and theology, for example, provide apprenticeships and internships to their students. Teachers typically have only a semester of student teaching before they are expected to provide instruction to students. Teaching can be a challenging and threatening experience for new teachers. The authors believe that mentor induction programs would be helpful.

Administrators must pay attention to beginning teachers. New teachers should be given assignments that are related to the

training, while extra curricular assignments should be reserved for the more experienced teachers (Billingsley, Bodkins, and Hendricks, 1991).

Billingsley (1993) does suggest that special educators with "higher salaries are less likely to leave than those who have the lower salaries." She notes, however, that the literature indicates that "salary was an issue only when teachers are dissatisfied with other elements of their work, for example, administrative support."

In the same article, Billingsley (1993) also states that "the study of special educators' career decisions has only begun and much remains to be learned." However, it is important to consider developing the understanding of the quality of teachers who remain in special education and those who leave special education.

Important Issues From The Literature

1. Little research has been conducted related to the retention of special education teachers.
2. Lack of research data about the retention of special education teachers leaves administrators in the position of making decisions about retention without objective information.
3. Traditional factors such as salary and benefits may not be as important for retention of special education teachers as less obvious issues such as supervisor support and working

conditions.

4. The use of unqualified special education teachers is an interim solution to the shortage of teachers, but not an appropriate long-term solution.
5. Additional research in this area might provide valuable insights into the problem of the retention of special education teachers.

The Problem

The Gadsden Independent School District employed seventy-two special education teachers during the 1992-93 school year. Following that academic year, fifteen special education resigned in addition to five special education teachers whose contracts were not renewed; some of those positions were not filled by licensed teachers. Identification of those factors which precipitate the resignation of special education teachers might enable administrators to devise strategies to address those factors, thereby decreasing the attrition of the district's special education teachers and increasing the number of the district's special education teachers remaining in the classroom.

Hypothesis

Certain conditions expressed by special education teachers differ between the group of teachers who remain in their positions for the following year, and the group of teachers who resign at the conclusion of the academic year. The between group differences may reveal to the researcher reasons why special education teachers tend to leave the field of special education.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project seeks to identify reasons why some special education teachers left the GISD following the 1992-93 academic year while others special education teachers remained in the district.

Method

This study surveyed special education teachers who were employed in the district for more than two years and are still employed for the 1993-94 academic year, and special education teachers who resigned between March 1993 through August 1993 in GISD.

Since no appropriate instrument was discovered in the literature, the survey for this project was designed by the author on the basis of personal experience, interviews with special education teachers, and feedback from a focus group. The survey, shown in Addendum A, asked special education teachers to express their perceptions about contact with students, school environment, principal support, support by other teachers, central office support, parent involvement, salary and benefits, policies and procedures, ancillary services, and certain characteristics of students and their parents. They were also asked why they resigned (departing teachers), or why they accepted an additional contract (remaining teachers).

A focus group was asked to assist in the development of the instrument. The focus group consisted of five special education

teachers who had been in the district in the district for a number of years. The focus group's discussion centered around students and their parents. The focus group suggested that the district review teacher orientation programs, policies and procedures in special education program, parent involvement and ancillary services.

The instrument was field-tested. Three special education teachers participated in the pilot project. The purpose for the pilot was to ensure that questions were clearly stated. Recommendations from the pilot group were accepted and adjustments to the instruments were made.

The questionnaire was mailed to special education teachers who resigned between March 1993 through August 1993, and to special education teachers who remained in the district following the 1992-93 academic year. A stamped self-addressed envelope was enclosed.

A completed survey questionnaire was returned by 66 percent of the teachers who remained in the district and 53 percent of the teachers who resigned from the district. Those who did not respond to the questionnaire by the deadline were called by telephone and encouraged to respond. Two additional questionnaires were received following the telephone contact with those who had not returned the survey.

Procedure Used in Analysis of Data

Respondents were given two equally weighted factors in questions one and two. In order to compare the two groups, within group percentages of total responses assigned to each factor were calculated. Comparable percentages were compared between groups. In questions three and four, respondents in both groups were asked to provide attitude statements about their students and the parents of the students, using a Likert response scale across six variables. The mean of responses to the questions was calculated by question for each group. In question five, respondents were asked to rank order response for remaining in the district or reasons for departing the district. The percentages of total points for each factor were calculated. Because the respondents were asked to rank order their responses each, reason was given a weighting factor; the number one reason was given a weighting factor of three points; number two reason was given two points; and number three reason was given one point. Data was sorted for comparison by high percentage of responses.

Feedback of Survey Data

A meeting has been scheduled to provide results of the project to district principals, special education coordinator, and Central Management Team (Superintendent, Assts Superintendents: Instruction, Personnel, Finance, and Support Services). The group will be asked to use this

information to develop strategies to improve retention of special education teachers.

Seven feedback designs were reviewed (Nadler, 1979). The Ad Hoc Collateral Group Design will be selected to facilitate the feedback process. The Ad Hoc Group will consist of principals, appointed by their peers, and the special education coordinator. They will further review the data and develop the plan of action to improve retention of special education teachers. Although this design calls for an external consultant, for the purpose of this project, this writer will coordinate the work of the Ad Hoc Group.

Of the seven feedback designs reviewed, the Ad Hoc Collateral Group Design was viewed as the most appropriate due to the problems that exist within the organizational system.

Results

The forty respondents consisted of twenty-nine females and eleven males. Twenty-seven of the respondents were Anglo, and ten of the respondents were Hispanic. Of the three other respondents, one was Black, one Native American, and one Other. Of the forty respondents, eleven were bilingual (English/Spanish). Of the teachers who departed from the district, none were bilingual, and all were Anglo. Departing teachers had taught in the district an average of 1.9 years while the remaining teachers had an average of 5.6 years of teaching experience in district.

Question One asked respondents to identify the two most

positive aspects of their position in the GISD. Table 1 presents a comparative list of the results of responses to this question. Little difference appears to be evident between groups in their views concerning school environment, support by other teachers, central office support, parent involvement, benefits, salary, policies and procedures, and ancillary services. Larger differences exist in between group responses related to student contact and principal support. The teachers who remained in the district stated that they felt their contact with students was more positive than did the departing teachers. The departing teachers, on the other, felt they had stronger support from principals. No significant trends were identified in respondent comments related to Question One.

Survey Question Two solicited identification of two negative factors related to their positions by members in both groups. Differences in percentages of responses between groups were small with regard to the following factors: parental involvement, ancillary services, salary, benefits, policies and procedures, other teacher support, central office support, and student contact. The largest differences were evident in the factor of principal support and school environment (Table 2). The teachers who departed reported no negative responses related to principal support, and a small negative reaction to school environment. The teachers who remained reported large negative responses related to principal support and school environment. Three comments (two from departing teachers)

TABLE 1

Positive Aspects of Position

Percent of Responses by Group

ITEM	REMAIN N=32	DEPART N=8
Student Contact	28.6%	22.3%
Principal Support	25.7	33.3
Other Teacher Support	15.7	16.7
School Environment	12.9	11.1
CID/Ancillary Services	5.7	--
Salary	2.9	--
Benefits	2.9	--
Other	2.9	--
Teacher Orient/Policies/Proc	1.4	11.1
Parent Involvement	1.4	5.5

TABLE 2

Negative Aspects of Position

Percent of Responses by Group

ITEM	REMAIN N=32	DEPART N=8
Parent Involvement	16.4%	13.3%
CID/Ancillary Service	16.4	13.3
School Environment	13.4	6.7
Salary	13.2	13.4
Teacher Orient./Policies&Proc	10.4	13.3
Principal Support	10.4	--
Other	7.5	40.0
Other Teacher Support	4.5	--
Benefits	3.0	--
Central office Support	3.0	--
Student Contact	1.5	--

identified interference by the school board as a negative factor. Other negative comments by departing teachers related to such issues as distance from personal residence (2), lack of materials (1), and lack of recognition as a professional (1).

The results of survey Question Three are presented in Table 3. Little difference between groups is evident in the mean Likert scale responses related to student responsibility, student preparedness, student behavior, student cooperativeness, and student attendance. The largest difference between in group means was related to teacher perception of the ability of students to speak English. Only one comment related to this question was provided by the respondents in either group.

Question Four asked teachers in both groups to express their attitudes about the parents of their students. Little between group differences were evident in the Likert scale means reflecting responses related to parental responsibility, parental behavior, parent cooperativeness, and ease of parental contact. The largest difference in means was related to teacher perceptions about the ability of their students' parents to speak English. No teacher in either group volunteered comments related to this question.

TABLE 3

Attitudes About Students

Mean of Responses

ITEM	REMAIN N=32	DEPART N=8
Cooperative	3.7	3.3
Attendance	3.7	3.4
English Speaking	3.1	2.3
Behavior	3.0	3.2
Responsible	2.9	3.0
Prepared	2.6	2.7

TABLE 4

Attitudes About Parents

Mean of Responses

ITEM	REMAIN N=32	DEPART N=8
Behaved	3.6	4.0
Cooperative	3.3	3.0
Responsible	3.3	2.9
Contact	2.6	2.7
English Speaking	2.1	2.6

Question Five asked departing teachers to rank order their top three reasons for leaving the district. Teachers who remained, by contrast, were asked to rank order their top three reasons for continuing their employment in the district. Results from the departing teachers are in Table 5A, while those of teachers who remained are shown in Table 5B. For the departing teachers, distance from home was the most frequently stated reason for resigning (43.2% of the total weighted responses). Treatment as a professional (11.3%), and students (9.1%) were also cited frequently. Teachers who remained in the district cited students (27.2% of the weighted responses), treatment as a professional (19.5%), and the district's special education programs (13.0) as important reasons for continuing their employment with the district. Two of five comments by departing teachers referred to school board interference as a negative factor.

TABLE 5A

Departed From School District

Percent of the Weighted Responses

ITEM	PERCENT
Distance from Home	43.2
Treatment as Professional	11.3
Students	9.1
Benefits	4.5
Special Education Programs	4.5
Salary	4.5
Family Relocation	2.2
Licensure issues	--
Working Conditions	--
Other	20.5

TABLE 5B

Remained in School District

Percent of the Weighted Responses

ITEM	PERCENT
Students	27.2
Treatment as Professional	19.5
Special Education Programs	13.0
Working Conditions	9.8
Distance from Home	8.2
Licensure Issue	3.3
Family Relocation	2.7
Benefits	2.2
Salary	1.6
Other	11.1

Discussion

Several differences between the groups of departing teachers and remaining teachers are evident. Departing teachers had complied an average of 1.9 years of experience in the district as opposed to a mean of 5.6 years of experience for the group who remained. In addition, five of eight departing teachers (62%) were on waivers to teach special education courses, while five of thirty-two remaining respondents (15%) were on waivers.

Teachers who remained in the district believed that their students spoke English to a greater degree and that students' parents spoke English less well than did the departing teachers.

Interestingly, departing teachers expressed more positive opinions about such factors as principal support and other teacher support. Departing teachers were only slightly less positive than remaining teachers concerning such issues as contact with students and school environment. Departing teachers were only slightly more negative about such issues as salary and policies and procedures.

A key factor in the departure of special education teachers seemed to be their belief that they had to travel too far between home and work (Q5). This is consistent with the literature (Billingsly and Cross, 1993). One factor which surfaced in this study which was not addressed in the literature review was a

perception by many departing teachers of interference in school affairs by the school board.

Summary

In summary, the results of the present study are generally consistent with the literature in that the departure of special education teachers from their teaching position tend to be related to several factors:

1. the desire to relocate.
2. less than five years of teaching experience in the position being vacated, and
3. teaching under waivers in the position being vacated.

The present study did uncover several statements by departing teachers concerning interference in school affairs by school board members. Little difference between groups was evident in teacher opinions about the district's policies and procedures, salary, benefits, parent involvement, student contact, school environment, and principal and other teacher support.

Conclusions

Several conclusions may tentatively be derived from the results of this study.

1. The major factor stated by special education teachers who leave their jobs in GISD is their belief that they have to travel too far to work.
2. Two additional factors related to the departure of special education teachers are in district teaching experience of less than two years, and being on waivers for teaching special education programs.
3. It is possible that special education teachers, because of the high demand of their skills, may decide to change positions because of a perceived situation of injustice or unfairness such as interference by school board members.

Intervention strategies might most effectively focus on addressing these factors.

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WRITER'S REACTION TO RESEARCH PROCESS

Reflections

1. When one is conducting field based research, one must be aware of political implications of the research project itself.
2. It is far more difficult to design one's own instrument than it is to borrow an instrument from the literature.
3. In doing this kind of research, it is better to collect small amount of data, which is well processed and is clearly related to the literature than it is to have a large amount of data which is poorly processed.
4. Completion of careful literature review prior to beginning the project saves time, provides a focus, and reduces dead ends; however, too heavy reliance on literature may place blinders on the researcher.
5. Field based research is time-consuming; it requires planning, organization and perseverance.
6. For a task-oriented individual, field based research can be a very exciting and a productive aspect of the professional experience.

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7. There are two forms of pay-off for field based research projects: the researcher gains by developing research skills and knowledge base, and the district gains if it accepts the validity of the results and implements intervention strategies.

Politics

1. Teachers involved were excited about being asked to provide this kind of feedback.
2. Principals expressed anxiety based on the presumption that the results would reflect negatively on their management.
3. The Director of Special Education expressed anxiety based on the presumption that the results would reflect negatively on her management of the Special Education Department.
4. Because of anxiety expressed by Principals and the Director of Special Education, the survey had to be restructured to focus on positive issues.
5. As the project evolved, it was necessary to continue to reinforce the focus on positive outcomes.
6. The method of providing feedback to the group was selected partially on the basis of the need to reduce resistance on the part of administrators.

Breakthroughs

1. This writer has gained confidence in her ability to plan and to conduct field based research.
2. Significant understanding was gained as to the nature of the interactive relationship between field based research and

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the institution's political/social structure.

Suggestions for Additional Research

1. In a school district with predominantly minority students, is there a relationship between the ethnicity of the teacher and his or her departure from the school district?
2. In a school district with predominantly bilingual student population, is there a relationship between bilingual capabilities of the teacher and his or her departure from the school district.

RESULTS OF SURVEY FEEDBACK

A brief overview of the literature was presented to the administrators prior to conveying the results of the survey. Some administrators exhibit some of the behaviors as described in the Nadler's (1979) article. Some were anxious while others were defensive. However, as the results were presented, they began to relax. The principals asked questions such as: what can we do to keep our special education teachers; do they know about the Tuition Loan Program for those who are on waivers; how can we keep the school board from interfering in administrative functions; do we need a more effective mentor program, etc.? These questions led to an open-ended discussion about developing strategies to improve retention of special education teachers.

The researcher stated that the literature review and focus

group discussion were consistent with the results of the survey. It was noted and reinforced that departing teachers had positive responses regarding principal support and students, and the remaining teachers expressed the same positive responses.

An Ad Hoc Group was appointed to further review the data and to develop the plan of action to improve retention of special education teachers in the district. The Ad Hoc Group will consist of eight administrators, seven principal and the special education coordinator. The eight member group will form two subgroups of four. The subgroups will then address the questions that the large group expressed during the discussion. The Ad Hoc Group was appointed by the principals.

The administrators were surprised that salary was not an issue. This is consistent with the literature. In her article, Billingsley (1993) noted that "salary is an issue when teachers are dissatisfied with other elements of their work, for example, administrative support." The facilitator reminded principals that the respondents have had positive experiences with administrative support at the building level, so salary in this case was not the issue. For the teachers who departed, distance was the issue, and for the teachers who remained, student contact was most positive.

The Ad Hoc Group will meet in January to begin the process. The results of this study will be presented to the participants in January.

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